

Draft Proposals FY 2007 OHMVR Grant Program Applications El Centro FO

Project 1: Law Enforcement

Total Requested: \$1,767,787

(Detailed cost information available on Project Cost and Deliverables (PCD) Spreadsheet in a separate document.)

Proposed Project Description:

If funded, this grant application proposes to pay for law enforcement labor on Public Lands managed by the BLM El Centro Field Office. The West Mesa, Eastern Desert, and Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Patrol Sectors have crucial law enforcement and legal concerns stemming from their unique terrains, natural, cultural, and resource concerns, growing numbers of OHV-recreation visitors, and a reduction in quality OHV recreation resources.

The increasing population in Southern California and Arizona has resulted in increased popularity of OHV recreation on public lands administered by the El Centro BLM. Visitor counts have recorded high visitation levels in the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area. All of these factors in conjunction with the focus of Law Enforcement efforts in the sand dunes have shown a direct impact on nearby, smaller OHV Open and Limited Use Areas. The Superstition Mountain OHV Open Area, Plaster City OHV Open Area, the Yuha Desert and other Limited Use Areas in the East Desert are experiencing a marked increase in OHV use. Impacts to sensitive resources show a need for increased Law Enforcement efforts in these areas. As always, the goal is effective law enforcement that at the same time does not diminish the quality of recreation experience by the law abiding public.

The ranger staff positions consist of one Chief, one supervisor, one field training officer, and nine permanent rangers.

The West Mesa

The West Mesa includes the Yuha Desert Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Management Area, the BLM Plaster City and Superstition Mountain OHV Open Areas, and the designated OHV trail areas around them. The West Mesa Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Management Area adjoins the Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area. The sector is located within a two- to three-hour drive from Los Angeles, Orange County, Riverside, San Diego (CA), and Tucson and Phoenix (AZ). There are also unique destinations, such as the Juan Bautista De Anza National Historic Trail and special natural areas including the Crucifixion Thorn Natural Area. In addition, opportunities to visit rare archaeological sites, such as the Yuha Geoglyphs, intaglios, and fossil-bearing outcrops like the Yuha Desert Shell

Beds and Fossil Canyon exist. The steadily increasing population growth in southern California and western Arizona metropolitan areas and the expanding popularity of OHV recreation has resulted in growing visitation to all recreation areas, including the West Mesa.

The San Sebastian Marsh is habitat for an endangered species, the desert pupfish (*Cyprinodon macularius*). The pupfish can be negatively impacted by illegal off-route OHV riding within the Marsh and illegal off-route riding near the Marsh. OHV recreation near the Marsh could increase erosion and sediment deposits in the marsh area. As a part of the management requirements for this area, BLM provides law enforcement patrols to increase compliance with on-route travel requirements. The law enforcement patrols are especially necessary in this area because OHV recreational users that frequent the nearby open area often do not understand that they are entering a limited use (stay on-route) area and how limited use areas are managed. Non-motorized recreational users, who access the area via motorized vehicles, are also attracted to the area due to the marsh and do not always understand their activities could have impacts on the endangered desert pupfish as well.

Altogether, the West Mesa consists of 1,240 miles of open routes and 41 miles of limited routes. The area contains three Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC): the Yuha Basin Area, the West Mesa and the San Sebastian Marsh / San Felipe Marsh Area that together comprise most of the West Mesa and Yuha Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Management Area. To the west, three federally designated wildernesses, Fish Creek Mountains, Coyote Mountains, and Jacumba, border the Area. The increase in use of the Area has resulted in a proliferation of off-route driving in limited-use areas such and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern. These issues are addressed through the Western Colorado Desert Routes of Travel Designation plan.

Resource issues specific to OHV recreation use in the West Mesa are:

- Resource / Vegetation destruction
- Illegal OHV hill climbing
- Travel by vehicles of all types off of designated, signed routes
- Willful destruction of restoration project sites.
- Archeological and cultural site protection

The Eastern Desert

Eastern Desert (including the East Mesa and Indian Pass areas) provide OHV opportunities outside the Imperial Sand Dunes but are limited to existing trails and routes. A network of trails east of the Dunes extends to the Colorado River and north to Interstate 10. Several Wilderness Areas and military installations limit motorized access. This area has sensitive resources such as the cultural and Native American values in and around the Indian Pass area. Little OHV opportunity exists directly west of the Dunes in the East Mesa Area of Critical

Environmental Concern. The cities of Brawley, Imperial, Holtville, and El Centro are directly west of the East Mesa.

Resource issues specific to OHV recreation use in the Area are:

- Vegetation destruction
- Intrusions into adjacent Wilderness areas
- OHV travel by vehicles off of designated routes
- Illegal OHV activity related to winter visitor camping
- Damage/destruction of archeological sites.

Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area (ISDRA)

The Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area is the most visited OHV recreation area in the California Desert Conservation Area. It is also considered the premier OHV recreation area in Southern California because of its outstanding opportunities. In addition, the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area provides unique habitat for several endemic and sensitive plant, insect, and animal species.

The Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area is located in Imperial County, California, in southeastern California approximately 25 miles west of the Colorado River and immediately north of the international border between the United States and Mexico. State Route 78 and Interstate 8 in the south Dunes provide the major access to the Imperial Sand Dunes. The City of Brawley is located 25 miles to the west and the City of El Centro 40 miles southwest.

The Sand Dunes encompass approximately 160,000 acres of which 26,202 acres are designated as the North Algodones Dunes Wilderness. Dunes visitation on non-holiday weekends often reach 30,000 people. Holiday visitation peaks about six times a year, with close to 200,000 visitors on Thanksgiving weekend.

During peak periods, BLM Law Enforcement Rangers and officers from the US Forest Service, National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife service and the US Border Patrol together with Imperial County Sheriff's Office, San Diego Sheriff's Office, California State Parks and Recreation, and California Highway Patrol assist with law enforcement in the Imperial Sand Dunes. In response to needs for extra law enforcement during peak holiday weekends, assistance sometimes comes from as far away as Hawaii and West Virginia.

A cooperative agreement with the Imperial County Sheriff's Office now facilitates assistance to the BLM. The Sheriff's Office now receives funding through a grant from the Off Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division and Commission. Currently, the County provides two full-time deputies and up to twenty-one additional officers from surrounding cities to work at the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area on busy holiday weekends. The grant to the Sheriff's Office

funds its support to BLM. However, BLM continues to fund other agencies participating in the holiday incidents.

Due to the BLM's continued L.E. presence over the past few years, there has been a large reduction in the lawlessness, riotous behavior, fights and assaults, and many of the other serious violations that have occurred in the past. Most of the people who had been instigating the lawlessness have simply stopped visiting the Imperial Sand Dunes or sought other areas. Those that remain understand that violators, will be caught, cited, and/or arrested. With the increase in staff, law enforcement personnel can immediately respond and take appropriate action. A direct result of this seems to be that the public is more willing to report violations and has more confidence in the ability of law enforcement to respond.

This obvious reduction in the lawlessness has allowed for increased enforcement of closure violations, Wilderness intrusions, and OHV safety regulations. In addition, this has also allowed personnel to be distributed to outlying county areas locations in response to increased use. Safety and resource protection issues are paramount, particularly those relating to:

- Off-highway driving under the influence of a drug or alcohol
- Under-age drinking of alcohol in OHV areas
- Use of illegal or controlled substances in OHV areas
- OHV violations (speeding, double riding, riding ATVs without a helmet, no safety flags on vehicles, unregistered vehicles, and equipment violations)
- Resource violations, principally littering, destroying a natural feature and dumping/burning of hazardous materials
- Possession of stolen vehicles and other property in OHV areas
- Theft of OHVs and other property
- Violations of closures and of limited-use areas.

BLM also provides emergency medical and rescue services for the recreational visitors in the ISDRA. Park Rangers respond to over 500 medical rescues per season. BLM is the only agency in the county with the specialized vehicles needed to safely extract victims from the dunes by ground transportation.

The BLM has a medical supply contract to procure the annual supplies needed to support the rescue efforts. With these funds, BLM could order items such as bandages, splints, backboards, and other rescue gear.

Past Accomplishments: Law Enforcement

Of the \$404,000.00 granted to the Bureau of Land Management El Centro Field Office the following expenditures are planned:

A sum of \$100,000.00 will be allotted to the United States Forest Service for law enforcement assistance in the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area on major holiday weekends.

A sum of \$100,000.00 will be allotted to the Imperial County Sheriff's Office (ICSO). ICSO will utilize these funds to bring additional law enforcement assistance to the ISDRA. This assistance comes from San Diego County Sheriff's Office, made available by a mutual aid agreement between the two Counties.

The 2006 OHV Grants awarded to the El Centro Field Office was not made available until May. Fee Money and other sources of funding were used for the 2005/2006 Dunes Season to provide similar law enforcement services.

The remaining \$204,000.00 will be used for OHV enforcement in the El Centro Resource Area to include but not limited to: Superstition Mountain OHV Open Area, the Lark Canyon OHV Area, Plaster City OHV Open Area, Limited Use Areas and wilderness patrols. Portions of the Grant will be spent toward Law Enforcement Ranger wages in the 2006/2007 Dunes Season.

Last season BLM responded to 756 calls for emergency medical services in the Imperial Sand Dunes. 306 victims were transported from the dunes by ground ambulance to the local hospital, 85 were transported from the accident scene in the deep dunes to the ground or air ambulance service by rescue buggy, and 22 were sent by helicopter.

Project 2: Restoration

Total Requested: \$477,459

(Detailed cost information available on Project Cost and Deliverables (PCD) Spreadsheet in a separate document.)

Proposed Project Description:

The El Centro Field Office within the California Desert District has been implementing restoration projects of closed routes and signing in areas with designated trails to meet legal obligations and societal expectations for desert ecosystems that produce goods and services, including those for recreation and biological diversity, for generations to come.

The purpose of this grant application is to continue restoring the vegetation and surface features on closed Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) routes within the West Mesa Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and East Mesa ACEC and signing of legal routes as an on going effort to improve wildlife habitat, the natural biological diversity of California desert ecosystems, and public safety and human health.

The West Mesa ACEC within the Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Management Area

The West Mesa Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Management Area forms one of the five land areas established under the Interagency Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Management Strategy (revised in 2003). Located to the southwest of the Salton Sea and west of the Imperial Valley, the Area consists of two unique Areas of Critical Environmental Concern: the San Sebastian Marsh / San Felipe Creek Area of Critical Environmental Concern and the West Mesa Area of Critical Environmental Concern, plus other BLM lands nearby. South and east, respectively, of the Management Area are the Plaster City OHV Open Area and the Superstition Mountain OHV Open Area. No restoration will take place inside the OHV Open Areas.

BLM established the West Mesa Area of Critical Environmental Concern in 1980 for its value as flat-tailed horned lizard (*Phrynosoma mcalli*) habitat, rare desert plants, and cultural resources. Similarly, the San Sebastian Marsh / San Felipe Creek Area of Critical Environmental Concern, established in the same year, has important features, including a prehistoric village site, plus a permanent water supply and rare desert aquatic and riparian ecosystems. Much of the entire area is also Essential Habitat Recovery Region for the peninsular population of desert bighorn sheep. The Marsh is also desert pupfish habitat as well as habitat for an introduced population of the unarmored three-spined stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus* spp. *williamsoni*).

East Mesa Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Management Area

The East Mesa Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Management Area is located just West of the Imperial Sand Dunes recreation area and North of Interstate 8 approximately 25 mile West of Yuma AZ. Specific threats to resources have been to: (1) archaeological resources; (2) loss of wildlife habitat, particularly for the flat-tailed horned lizard (*Phrynosoma mcalli*); and (3) damage to soils, vegetation, and landscape vistas in the course of Border Patrol interdictions of illegal entries into the United States and in illegal cross-country travel by recreational vehicles.

Past Accomplishments: Restoration

In October of 2003 the Student Conservation Corp (SCA) began restoration of closed routes within the Yuha Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and in 2005 the West Mesa. The SCA were contracted by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) from a grant from the Off Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

The SCA crew also spent time working with Border Patrol agents informing them of their work and the need for the work. Additionally the SCA crew spent time on busy holiday weekends interfacing with the users by passing out maps, brochures, and providing information about their restoration work and about Yuha and West Mesa.

Accomplishments for the first three seasons (October through May) of restoration/signing in the Yuha ACEC and West Mesa are listed below:

- Total length of roads restored: 101,219.38 meters
- Total area restored: 372,613.24 square meters
- Acres restored: 92.03
- Bushes planted: 4,179
- Garbage collected: 7,081 pounds
- Fire rings broken up: 69
- Trail and campground signing

With a recently approved grant from the OHMVR division from the last grant cycle, restoration will continue in the Yuha and West Mesa and begin in the East Mesa as well.

Project 3: Equipment

Total Requested: \$53,411

(Detailed cost information available on Project Cost and Deliverables (PCD) Spreadsheet in a separate document.)

Proposed Project Description:

800 Megahertz (MHz) Radios

The El Centro Field Office is one of five Field Offices making up the California Desert District (CDD). The CDD VHF radio system encompasses Southern California from The Pacific Ocean to the Colorado River and from the United States Mexico Border to the southern slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The entire CDD Law Enforcement and Fire Program utilize the Federal Interagency Communications Center (FICC) for dispatch services.

El Centro Field Office Law Enforcement Rangers and Special Agents often find themselves working in conjunction with other agencies in Off Highway Vehicle Areas, Limited Use Areas and Wilderness Areas. BLM Rangers and Agents commonly communicate with other agency personnel in the field, such as: The Imperial County Sheriff's Office (ICSO), San Diego County Sheriff's Office (SDSO), California Highway Patrol, ICSO Off Highway Vehicle Enforcement and Safety Team, De Anza Search and Rescue, Gold Cross Ambulance and Medical Air Services. In the past, all of these agencies communicated via frequencies on a VHF radio system. In 2005 the majority of Imperial County law enforcement and emergency medical agencies converted from the VHF radio system to an 800 MHz radio system. El Centro Rangers and Agents, although an active participant in Imperial Valley law enforcement and Emergency Medical Services were not able to make the same transition.

This transition has impacted the Ranger/Agent program by making radio communication with other public safety agencies impossible. The two systems do not interface easily. Currently, with very few exceptions, the officers must communicate through the separate Dispatch Centers. For example, an ICSO/SDSO Deputy observes something on public lands and wants to relay the information to a BLM Ranger. The Deputy will have to contact the ICSO/SDSO dispatch, which in turn will have to call FICC, who will then contact the Ranger. The Ranger will then have to repeat this process to relay a message back to the Deputy. This way of communicating is cumbersome, time consuming and potentially dangerous to field personnel and the public. A Ranger rendering emergency medical services to an injured rider cannot radio patient status directly to the responding ambulance. An officer calling for back-up on one radio system, may not be heard by the closest, most available officer because of the separate systems.

With the purchase of handheld 800 MHz radios for the El Centro Field Office Rangers and Special Agents, this problem will be resolved. Dispatch services with FICC will remain the same, but the problem with in the field communications with other public safety agencies will be alleviated.

Past Accomplishments: Equipment

The El Centro Field Office has utilized equipment purchased with grant money, extensively in the past. Heavy equipment has been used to build infrastructure in the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area including camping pads and the vendor pad. It was utilized to repair rain damaged drainages in the Lark Canyon OHV Area. The same heavy equipment has been used to maintain these infrastructures.

Open, Closed and Limited routes have been maintained and signed using Off Highway Vehicles (OHV) purchased with grant money. Highly specialized dunebuggies purchased by grant money were used for emergency medical services and search and rescues.

Emergency Medical Supplies purchased with grant money have been used to save lives in off road areas managed by the El Centro field office.

Project 4: Facilities Operation and Maintenance

Total Requested: \$654,006

(Detailed cost information available on Project Cost and Deliverables (PCD) Spreadsheet in a separate document.)

Proposed Project Description:

Through this grant application, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposes to fund labor and maintenance contracts, in support of the OHV recreation program.

The Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area (ISDRA) is the most popular Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) area in the southwest United States. It encompasses the most intensively visited recreational area in the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA). Visitation can reach peaks of over 150,000 people per weekend during winter holidays and an annual total of over 1.2 million. It provides a unique, world-class recreation opportunity. The primary recreational use is camping and the use of OHVs.

Funding of the maintenance contracts could provide for trash collection, vault toilet cleaning and pumping, and holiday portable toilet rentals. Trash is collected at several sites throughout the ISDRA. Vault toilets are pumped three to four times a season on an as needed basis. They are also cleaned once a week during the season and daily during holiday periods. Portable toilets are also rented and placed throughout the camping areas to handle the extra holiday visitation.

Past Accomplishments: Facilities Operation and Maintenance

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) was funded \$266,500 for a facilities operations and maintenance grant. A project agreement was signed between the BLM and California State Parks Off-highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division May 11, 2006. Due to the delay, the funds were not available to be used in the 2005/2006 Dunes visitation season. Funds from this project will be utilized for the 2006/2007 season.

Since the grant funds were not available until May 2006, the BLM provided the maintenance and emergency medical services through funds generated from the fee program. BLM expects to provide the same level of services next season with grant funds helping to cover a portion of the costs.

The types of services regularly provided to 1.2 million visitors in the Dunes are:

- Responded to 756 medical / rescue calls
- 900 trash bin service trips
- 33 vault toilets pumped as needed
- 33 vault toilets cleaned weekly (Oct-May), daily cleaning on winter holidays
- Maintenance of facilities and sand clearing by BLM maintenance staff
- 30 portable toilets rented and placed throughout the camping areas during holiday visitation.

Project 5: Conservation

Total Requested: \$51,854

(Detailed cost information available on Project Cost and Deliverables (PCD) Spreadsheet in a separate document.)

Proposed Project Description:

The flat-tailed horned lizard (*Phrynosoma mcalli*, FTHL) is a BLM-designated sensitive species inhabiting the Sonoran Desert of southeastern California, southwestern Arizona, northeastern Baja California, and northwestern Sonora. In California, agricultural and urban development in the Imperial and Coachella Valleys has eliminated this species over a large part of the original range. Immigration enforcement along the border with Mexico is also disrupting habitat and impacting populations. Much of the remaining FTHL range in the United States provides settings for off-highway-vehicle (OHV) recreation. BLM is monitoring FTHL populations on public land to determine the effects of motorized recreation and travel.

An interagency agreement, the Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Rangewide Management Strategy, among state and federal agencies governs management of the FTHL in its natural range in the United States. This agreement designated FTHL management areas where the land management agencies monitor and protect populations (Foreman 1997, updated 2003). The agreement puts in place a conservation strategy intended to prevent listing of the FTHL as a threatened or endangered species. Petitions to the Fish and Wildlife Service have been received requesting federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, and there have been several years of litigation over this issue. Proper implementation of the management strategy is essential to keep in place the OHV opportunities that now exist in the deserts of Imperial County.

The interagency conservation agreement established three FTHL management areas in California: the Yuha Desert, West Mesa, and East Mesa. These are wholly within the BLM El Centro Field Office resource area and are now designated as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs, Figure 1).

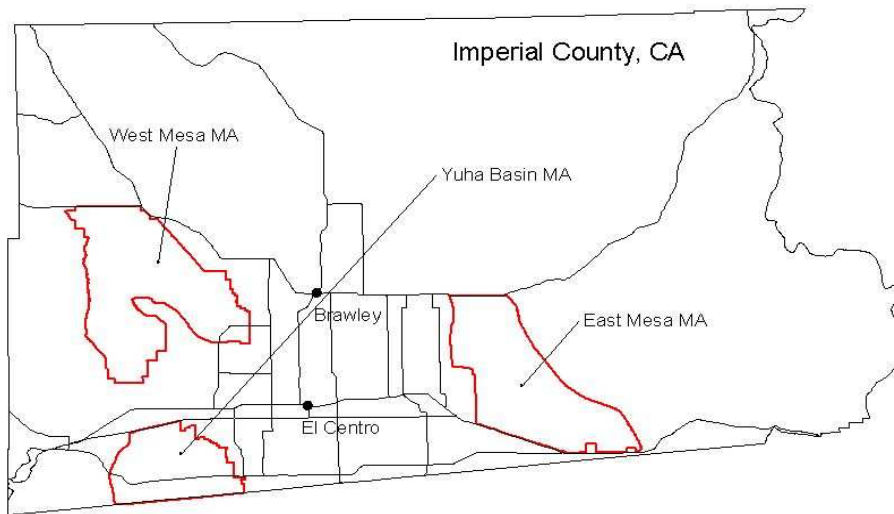


Figure. 1. Vicinity Map of Yuha Basin MA, Showing its Location in Southeastern California. Imperial County, CA. 2003.

The Yuha Desert ACEC lies west of the agricultural center of Imperial County, south of Interstate 8, and west of the Jacumba Wilderness Area. This ACEC contains several large sandy desert washes, expanses of desert pavement and gravel, and dry mud flats and hills. The West Mesa ACEC, north of Interstate 8, has areas of dry mud flats and hills, areas of sandy or gravelly substrate, and deeply cut washes. The East Mesa ACEC lies just west of the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area and the Coachella Canal between Interstate 8 and California Highway 78. This ACEC typically has sandy substrates with small patches of dry mud flats, gravelly areas and stabilized dunes. All three areas provide opportunities for OHV use on designated routes.

The BLM El Centro Field Office monitors the population of FTHLs in each ACEC to establish a baseline population estimate and trends in population size over time. The BLM has used a mark-release-recapture method to estimate populations of FTHLs. In 2007, BLM will employ the occupancy method, which is more cost-effective and can make determinations over a larger area. Both methods are described in the management strategy and are acceptable as a measure of population trends.

Surveys to monitor FTHLs occur principally from April to October when ambient temperatures are best suited for lizards. Air temperatures during surveys should be between 35°C and 42°C at one centimeter above ground.

The large land area of each FTHL management area (ACEC) and the cost of manpower required for this method make it difficult for BLM to complete surveys in all three ACECs each year. However, the BLM El Centro Field Office has committed to a three-year monitoring cycle of visits so that surveys are completed in at least one ACEC each year. When funding is available, the BLM will complete monitoring surveys in more than one management area in a year. However, no federal appropriations to BLM for this monitoring are expected in 2007.

Three people, one BLM biologist and two BLM contractors, visit each of twelve plots five times over the course of seven days. The twelve weeks of FTHL monitoring take place from late May to late August 2007.

Field work to monitor FTHLs on BLM lands is concurrent with monitoring for FTHLs at the Ocotillo State Recreational Vehicle Area. Additional surveys and monitoring are conducted by the military and the other cooperating agencies. All agency results are evaluated by the interagency Management Oversight Group each year.

Past Accomplishments: Conservation

Flat-tailed horned lizard monitoring in Imperial County

The El Centro Field Office has performed monitoring studies of the flat-tailed horned lizard since the interagency Rangeland Management Strategy was approved in 1997. Many of these studies were funded by the California Department of Parks and Recreation, Division of Off Highway Motorized Vehicle Recreation. Continuation of the monitoring studies is essential to show that protective management is effective for this species and to prevent its listing as threatened or endangered.

The three established management areas in Imperial County are all heavily utilized for recreation. Maintenance of the opportunity for vehicular desert travel in these areas is dependent on maintenance of healthy populations of the flat-tailed horned lizard.

Monitoring to date has revealed interesting findings. The distribution and abundance of the lizards appears to be more dependent on the type of substrate than the number of vehicle tracks recorded on study plots. By identifying the most important micro-habitats within the management areas, BLM can better assure that impacts from vehicle uses are minimized.

Of the three management areas, the Yuha supports the highest numbers of lizards, about ten times the number within the West Mesa management area. The eastern half, especially the Pinto Wash area appears to be the "mother lode" of flat-tails and should be carefully conserved. However, the number of lizards in this area is substantially reduced along either side of Highway 78.

A shift to occupancy monitoring instead of mark-recapture techniques proved to be much less labor intensive and allowed monitoring a larger area. Occupancy

estimation could prove to be important for modeling habitat and better determining the effects of management activities on the species. The 2007 grant request will test this method in the most productive habitat of the Yuha Desert.

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